

Relations

BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

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*The Importance of Language in the Relationships
between Humans and Non-Humans*

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Animal Derogation and Anthropocentric Language

An Ecofeminist Reading of Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

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ABSTRACT

The theory of ecofeminism is all about drawing comparisons and connections between old as well as new forms of oppressions against women and the environment and it fights against all forms of injustices to make earth a better place to live. Animal liberation theorists not only highlight animal abuse through hunting, caging, butchering, testing, and experimenting but they are of the opinion that animals are abused and derogated through the patriarchal language as well. In this regard, this paper attempts to explore the anthropocentric use of language in Barbara Kingsolver's "Prodigal Summer" so as to discuss the way the author highlights animal devaluation and depreciation in terms of language. Kingsolver draws readers' attention towards animal devaluation through various tropes (mostly similes) to highlight animal abuse in her ecofeminist text. The paper will examine the ways in which characters derogate each other through association with different animals and birds and show how the use of language plays a great role in the devaluation and derogation of nonhuman world.

Keywords: androcentrism; animal abuse; anthropocentrism; attribution; devaluation; ecofeminism; language; non-human; oppression; patriarchy.

When we talk about the victimization of humans, we use animal metaphors derived from animal sacrifice and animal experimentation: someone is a scapegoat or a guinea pig. Violence undergirds some of our most commonly used metaphors that cannibalize the experiences of animals: beating a dead horse, a bird in the hand, I have a bone to pick with you.

Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*

We and the animals whom we use should be viewed as partners in a joint venture. We can teach one another respect and trust, and animals can facilitate contact with ourselves and help us learn about our place in this complex but awe-inspiring world.

Marc Bekoff, *Encyclopaedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare*

1. INTRODUCTION

Derogation and devaluation of animals through language may appear slightly different from exploitation of them in dairy farms, laboratories or slaughterhouses, but basically it is not. For language promotes every form of exploitation through indoctrination. The origins of animal derogation may be seen springing from anthropocentric language just as women oppression originates from androcentric language. Since man has been abusing the nonhuman world in the same fashion in which he oppresses women, nature, and other weaker sections of society, animals appear to be the first commodity man used to survive on the surface of earth. Man has been exploiting animals for food, transport, clothing, and sport from the dawn of time. Mankind has been surviving on raw meat besides wild fruits and vegetables before the invention of fire. In other words, the practice of hunting or using animals as a source of food, sport and transport is as old as human history. Animal liberation theorists believe that animals are not merely used for multiple purposes, but ruthlessly abused in circuses, film industries, science laboratories, meat enterprises and dairy industries. Attributing animal traits to abuse men as well as women is a common practice in almost every culture and using animals to abuse humans is the result of man's belief of being supreme among all the creations of God.

Karen J. Warren, for instance in her article "A Feminist Philosophical Perspective on Ecofeminist Spiritualities", provides a long list of animals that are commonly used to derogate women as well as nature. Warren observes that:

Women are described in animal terms as pets, cows, sows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, old hens, pussycats, cats, birdbrains, harebrains. Animalizing or naturalizing women in a (patriarchal) culture where animals are seen as inferior to humans (men) thereby reinforces and authorizes women's inferior status. (1995, 127)

Warren believes that derogation of animals through language is not different from the language which is used to derogate mother earth as well as women. For instance, using the term infertile or barren for a woman or a girl who cannot bear children. Moreover, earth as well as women undergo

oppression in terms of scientific or medicinal experimentation (which are utterly the modern inventions of patriarchal mind-sets) to gain fertility. In this regard Warren further writes that:

language that feminizes nature in a (patriarchal) culture where women are viewed as subordinate and inferior reinforces and authorizes the domination of nature. "Mother Nature" is raped, mastered, conquered, mined; her secrets are "penetrated" and her "womb" is to be put into service of the "man of science". Virgin timber is felled, cut down; fertile soil is tilled, and land that lies "fallow" is "barren", useless. The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalizing them. (1995, 127)

However, Warren in her analysis mentions the female animals that are used to ridicule women only. Men are similarly derogated and ridiculed by animal attributions which Warren takes for granted. The practice of comparing men with sloths, swine, pigs, hounds, asses, donkeys, foxes, bears, etc is equally prevalent in almost every society. In *Encyclopaedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare* Clinton R. Sanders argues that:

a person can be degraded by calling him or her such things as an "animal", "pig", "chicken", "snake", or "dirty dog". These animal labels are intended to demonstrate that those to whom they are applied are less than "real" human beings. (1998, 132)

In addition to this, birds, insects and reptiles are no exception when it comes to deprecation of women or men through everyday language.

Nonetheless, the matter of fact is that the association of animals with humans does not ridicule humans only, it is simultaneously devaluing animals also, but the devaluation and depreciation of animals has always been overlooked. Animals may not be able to understand such derogation but the derogation itself substantiates and reinforces animal abuse. Derogation or abuse of nonhuman animals through language results from man's anthropocentric sense and this anthropocentric sense justifies man's domination over the nonhuman world. Humans do not concern themselves with the deprecation everyday language inflicts upon animals and the most condemnable example of animal derogation is the ridiculous description of male as well female sexual organs through the names of certain animals and birds like cock, pussy, ass etc.

Given the language as a tool of domination and devaluation, Carol J. Adams in *Sexual Politics of Meat* opines that, "[n]ot only is our language male-centered, it is human-centered as well. When we use the adjective 'male', such as in the preceding sentence, we all assume that it refers solely to human males" (2010, 93). Meanwhile, reflecting over the use

of “it” for animals in everyday language instead of using “he” or “she”, Adams asserts that such usage distances animals from humans. Adams believes that:

Language distances us further from animals by naming them as objects, as “its”. Should we call a horse, a cow, dog or cat, or any animal “it”? “It” functions for nonhuman animals as “he” supposedly functions for human beings, as a generic term whose meaning is deduced by context. (2010, 93)

Likewise the exclusive usage of the word Adam for men segregates women from the mainstream. In this regard, Antje Schrupp in *A Brief History of Feminism* writes that:

the Hebrew word “Adam” is not the name of a man; it is simply the word for “human being”. Adam had no gender in the very beginning. The creation of Eve, then, did not so much introduce woman into the world as gender difference. Out of the gender-neutral human being “Adam” came man and woman. (2017, v)

Moreover, animals are also devalued in terms of being considered as ominous. People, for example, consider it inauspicious if a cat crosses their way. Owls are universally derogated by being considered as ill omen signalling ruination. Ravens are supposed to be the plunderers, bats are deemed to be the associates of evil forces. Foxes are believed to be cunning; parrots are defamed for being excessively vocal; crocodiles are believed to be sly for faking tears to dupe its prey; wolves are also believed to be the enemies of the human race. The crowing of the crow is also used to derogate boisterous people. The expression, an upstart crow is frequently used to refer to a successful person without appropriate skills to socialise with others of the same class.

There are but a few examples in which fiction writers have highlighted such issues in their creative pieces. For instance, Kahlil Gibran’s poetry collection *The Wanderer* contains a poem titled “Tears and Laughter” wherein a hyena and a crocodile mournfully narrate the prejudice developed by humans against them, the crocodile for example while addressing to a hyena states that:

“... Sometimes in my pain and sorrow
I weep, and then the creatures always say, ‘They
are but crocodile tears’. And this wounds me be-
yond all telling”.

The hyena asserts while addressing its own plight to crocodile that:

“... I gaze at the beauty of the world, its
wonders and its miracles, and out of sheer joy I

laugh even as the day laughs. And then the people
of the jungle say, 'it is but the laughter of a
hyena'". (1932, 10)

Agha Shahid Ali, in the same vein, gives voice to a wolf in his poem "Wolf's Postscript to the Little Red Riding Hood". The wolf appears to be trying to clear the misconceptions regarding his very character as a child molester in the fairy tales. Wolf asserts that the tale of Little Red Riding Hood and the Huntsman has defamed his character but, he is not the way he has been framed in the tale. While addressing to the readers Wolf states that:

And you may call me a Big Bad Wolf
Now my only reputation.
But I was no child molester.
Though you'll all agree she was pretty.
And the huntsman:
Was I sleeping while he snipped my black fur
And filled me with garbage and stones? (2009, 100)

As the expression "Big Bad Wolf" is also vaguely used in everyday language, and it stands for a person who creates trouble. Agha Shahid Ali defends the case of wolf by providing a deconstructive reading of this fairy tale and says that wolf's character has been used as molester just to amuse children, but people have ever since framed wolf as a molester and a cruel being. Wolf justifies himself by saying that if you revisit the tale, you will find that I could have devoured Red Riding Hood right there in the jungle instead of asking her the whereabouts of her grandmother:

Why did I ask her where her grandma lived?
As if I, a forest dweller,
Didn't know of the cottage
Under the three oak trees
And the old woman who lived there
All alone?
As if I couldn't have swallowed her years before? (2009, 101)

Tropes that carry animal derogation originate from creation myths and folktales. For example, the expressions like: "as cunning as fox", "as blind as bat", "as lazy as a toad", "as crazy as a loon", "as hungry as a bear", "as old as hills", "as sick as a dog" etc. are mostly derived from folk literature wherein the personification of animals has contributed to the everlasting derogation of non-human world. In this regard, Jason Wyckoff in his essay "The Radical Potential of Analytic Animal Liberation Philosophy" asserts that

It is worth our time to ask whether it is possible to uproot the expressions we use in our discourse about animals and use them in ways that defy their ordinary meanings. Some feminists, for example, have attempted to do this with words like “slut” (think about the “Slut walk” movement that formed to resist rape culture) and “bitch” (as in Bitch Flicks, “a website devoted to reviewing films and television through a feminist lens”). (2021, 311)

Jason Wyckoff’s ideas again give the impression that theorists are more concerned with the devaluation of women through the attribution of animals, but the derogation of animals is yet again taken for granted. Another example wherein theorists seem to be solely concerned about the derogation of women and taking the case of animals for granted appears in Lesley Kordecki’s analysis of the devaluation of women through the comparison with animals in her essay “Animal Studies and Ecofeminist Literature”. She asserts that:

Although the comparison of the female human to animals can be seen by many as a derogation of women – consider the verbal crossovers of the English word “bitch” – a deeper assessment of the uniqueness of animals can produce very different and at times positive connections between female humans and animals. (2023, 282)

In short, such expressions need a deconstructive reading because the role of animals in the general drama of sustainability of life on earth is as important as the role of humans, plants, and other beings. Although plants and vegetables are also used as vehicles to describe negative traits of humans. The bitterness of gall, hemlock and ladyfinger is commonly used to describe the ill-tempered and eccentric nature of humans. More examples of comparisons in which trees, plants and vegetables are used as vehicles to ridicule humans may be found in Hindi and Urdu language.

Peter Singer whose contribution in the animal liberation movement is comparably huge, considers using the word “animals” more polite than using the words like “wild”, “savage” or “brute”. Singer in the Preface to the 1975 edition of his book *Animal Liberation the Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement* asserts that:

We commonly use the word “animal” to mean “animals other than human beings”. This usage sets humans apart from other animals, implying that we are not ourselves animals – an implication that everyone who has had elementary lessons in biology knows to be false.

In the popular mind the term “animal” lumps together beings as different as oysters and chimpanzees, while placing a gulf between chimpanzees and humans, although our relationship to those apes is much closer than the oyster’s. (2002, xxiv)

2. “PRODIGAL SUMMER”: UNDERLINING ANIMAL DEROGATION THROUGH ANTHROPOCENTRIC LANGUAGE

Prodigal Summer is Kingsolver’s fifth novel which knits three interconnecting storylines, and each story is dominated by the themes related to the case of animals, insects, and trees. The novel is set in rural Kentucky and the first storyline begins in the mountainous region of Zebulon Forest. The first storyline, titled as “Predators”, narrates the story of Deanna, a forest ranger who had recently bidden adieu “to the brick house wherein she was neatly pressed between a husband and neighbours” (Kingsolver 2009, 7) and had created a job of a forest ranger for herself besides doing research on the habitat and population of coyotes in Zebulon. Deanna is seen all alone in her cabin in the heart of woods, tracking the footmarks of coyotes from dawn to dusk, unmindful of the fact that her solitude is ravished by a male hunter Eddie Bando. In the first storyline, Kingsolver highlights the themes central to ecofeminism and animal liberation theory through the verbal confabulations of Deanna and Eddie.

The second storyline is titled as “Moth Love”, which introduces Lusa Landowski and her husband Cole Widener. Here again Lusa serves as the protagonist of the storyline and the story is set in rural Kentucky. Their life as farmers also highlights the issues related to the abuse of nature as well as women. The third storyline is titled as “Old Chestnut”, which juxtaposes the character of its protagonist Nannie Rawley with her neighbour Mr. Walker. This section of the novel also contains a lot of expressions which connote animal derogation. Both Nannie and Mr. Walker have to mind their orchards; Nannie has an apple orchard and the latter owns a chestnut orchard; however, Nannie prefers organic farming and Garnett Walker uses every kind of pesticide and herbicide to protect his orchard from blights and beetles. This ideological difference, regarding the use of chemical sprays and organic ways of farming, often turns into serious arguments between the two. Kingsolver highlights many themes which are central to ecofeminism through the arguments which take place between Nannie and Garnett.

The paper focuses on the tropes particularly similes and metaphors used by human characters to derogate humans and consequently animals in Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*. On the second encounter between Deanna and Eddie, for instance, Deanna compares Eddie’s shagginess with that of “a crow in the misty rain. His hair had the thick, glossy texture she envied slightly” (9). Another instance which might be used as an example of animal abuse is Eddie’s description of himself as “a pain in the ass” (13) for Deanna. As already discussed, the word “ass”

is frequently used as an informal expression or a slang to describe a person's stupidity or stubbornness. Expressions like "asshole", "smart ass", "pompous ass" etc. are more frequent in which the poor animal is used as a butt of ridicule. "Big bad wolf" is another expression which appears in *Prodigal Summer*. The term stands for a person who is blamed for causing problems; a scapegoat, or a bogeyman and the term must catch the very attention of an animal lover so far as animal derogation is concerned. The idiomatic expression "Barking Dogs" is also one of the frequently used expressions, often applied to refer to a person whose actions are weaker than his words. Although, in *Prodigal Summer*, the narrator compares Deanna's braid with a "neglected hound", which sounds more derogatory than the commonly used expression: "barking dogs seldom bite". Another expression in the novel which brings out animal derogation is "Son of a Bitch", often used by people out of anger to ridicule others, however Deanna uses it for coyote when she notices bird seed scattered all around and wonders who else has been feeding chickadees; "You rascal, she said aloud, laughing. You magnificent son of a bitch. You've been spying on me" (64).

"Stacks of Sloth" is an expression used by Garnett for Nannie's compost piles when he observes Nannie "too busy with her bug traps and voodoo to get rid of her tree trash" (133). Though sloth is one of the seven deadly sins according to Christian tradition and the word "sloth" is usually used for an idle or lazy person, Garnett uses the word "sloth" to describe the piles of refuse. "Excuse me for having pigs instead of children" (116) is how Jewell refers to her children for creating a mess around Lusa's home. Although pigs must be given some respect and honour for making the surroundings dirt free but unfortunately, they experience abuse in slaughterhouses besides being ridiculed through everyday language.

At Little Brothers' shop, it appears to Garnett that Nannie and her friends are laughing at him because Nannie has shared the episode of snapping turtles with them. He feels offended and states that: "they were laughing like a pack of hyenas" (146). Besides calling Nannie a rumour monger, an old biddy and a backbiting hag, Garnett goes on to say that: "they [Nannie and her friends] were braying like donkeys" (146). Another example of derogation through impolite words used by Garnett Walker for goats can be seen when Lusa phones Garnett in chapter fourteen to get instructions regarding the management of goats. Garnett instructs her to run an advertisement in a daily newspaper and people will give her their goats for free. Lusa is wondering how she could turn up her nose at somebody's offer of free animals, but Garnett assures

her that: "You go to them. They're the beggars, they're hoping you'll take the useless beasts off their hands" (212). Garnett further instructs her not to choose weak or ill goats whom he refers to as parasites. However, the word "beast" is used by the narrator in chapter four itself for a Luna moth. In chapter fourteen Garnett uses the word several times for machines and for every living entity while speaking with Nannie over the evolution of life on earth.

The word "beast" is metaphorically used by the narrator for the beating heart of Garnett, when:

One of the leaning trees in the bank shifted hard, with a groan and a crack, causing the old man's heart to leap in his chest like a crazed heifer trapped in the loading chute. He stopped dead on the trail, laying a hand on his chest to calm that poor doomed beast. (270)

Nonetheless, whenever the word "beast" appears in the novel it always connotes horror and dread and thus unravels how anthropocentric language contributes to animal derogation. In chapter twenty-nine the narrator poetically uses the word "beast" for the howling wind to create the horrible atmosphere generated by storm amid rain: "While she watched, in the space of just a few minutes, the rain died back drastically and the lightning seemed to have moved past the ridge top, but a wind came howling like the cold breath of some approaching beast" (433).

Similarly, the word "monster" also occurs several times in the novel, even if not used for men or women but its usage for the inanimate objects carries the offence for the animals, because the word is exclusively used for them. In the first chapter the word "monster" is used for a huge trunk of an old chestnut tree. Garnett, even Nannie, uses the word "monster" for the snapping turtle in chapter fourteen. The narrator uses the word "monster" for a snake when "Deanna breathed hard against the urge to scream at this monster or tear it down from the rafters and smash its head" (329). Even though man's capabilities to tame every nonhuman species turns him into the most powerful and callous monster, yet the word "monster" is always used for nonhumans. Andrzej Elzanowski asserts that:

Aside from individual dislikes and propaganda from those in trades that depend on the use of animals as commodities, the two main universal reasons for the derogation of animals are cultural tradition and the psychological reaction of blaming an innocent victim. (1998, 129)

Therefore, it is zoophobia which frames the poor reptile as monstrous and consequently defames it.

In Judeo-Christian traditions serpent is believed to be responsible for the eviction of Adam from the Garden of Eden. These narratives

have contributed to the formation of its diabolical image. The adjective “Venomous” is frequently used for a noxious or pernicious person. However, in *Prodigal Summer* the word serpent is used for the taste of wine by Wideners in chapter fifteen, in fact they have named their drink after serpent. Mary Edna, for example, after tasting the wine comments that: “all of it bites as the serpent” (224). In the same chapter, when Lusa heard the commotion outside the house and “walked down toward the chicken house, deciding to investigate whatever it was that was biting these men, a serpent” (225). The word “serpent” occurs again, when the entire family was completely drunk. Lusa admits that: “We are sinking deep in sin’, she sang quietly as she walked past Mary Edna with a Serpent in each hand, heading down toward the barn to check on the progress of the ice cream crankers” (230).

Not unlike pigs, chickens undergo abuse through caging, moulting, beak trimming, and ruthless slaughtering, besides being derogated through language. In his entry on “Chickens” in *Encyclopaedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare* Joy A. Mench asserts that: “[t]he poultry industry is the largest (in terms of animal numbers) and most highly automated of all of the animal-production industries. In the United States alone, nearly 8 billion poultry, mainly chickens and turkeys but also waterfowl, game birds, ostriches, and emus, are raised each year” (101). Through her novel *Prodigal Summer* Kingsolver gives several examples in which birds are derogated in the anthropocentric language. Deanna, for instance, reflecting over the idea of her cousins: “wished she could have seen their chickenish cousins the heath hens, who used to strut around in clearings with their feathers standing straight up, inflating the yellow balloons on their necks to make booming sounds you could hear for miles” (190).

Lusa compares the bodily movements of her girls (goats) with chickens, which somehow does not sound derogatory when she says “they (goats) stuck out their elbows like chickens spreading their wings in the dust, pulled their bodies up through the hole, and emerged into the main room of the barn” (290). Deanna describes Eddie Bando’s stupidity by calling him “a mad birdbrain” (261). Garnett uses the word “odd bird” (262) twice in the novel in order to describe Nannie’s eccentric and peculiar behaviour. In chapter fourteen, the narrator describes Garnett “as naked as a jaybird” (208).

In addition to this, the narrator compares Lusa with a “drowned rat” (222), when she was walking around her home with wet clothes; Little Rickie compares her with a “wet dog” (409). In yet another instance in the novel Jewel derogates polecats by uttering that her child is stinking

like a “polecat” (312). These analogies are undoubtedly subtle examples of animal derogation which have been consciously used by Kingsolver in her novel to bring out the way in which humans derogate the animals and birds through their language and which largely remains overlooked and unchecked thereby promoting animal devaluation and derogation.

3. CONCLUSION

Kingsolver’s ecofeminist text *Prodigal Summer* contains innumerable examples which can be used to describe anthropocentricity in language. The text very subtly explores how birds, insects etc. are used as a tool (by the use of language) to derogate women as well as men and such usage not only serves as a medium to deprecate humans but unconsciously licences humans to develop a kind of prejudice against animals. Given the animal rights and animal interests these expressions within human language need to be removed because they curtail animal interests.

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